

Adapting Curriculum to Meet the Needs of Exceptional Learners

Good curriculum must respect the unique characteristics of the learner. It should recognize and support the need of each learner to make sense of ideas and information, reconstructing older understandings with new ones. Good curriculum will address interest and readiness levels.

When implementing the Montana Content Standards, schools must provide *all* students with appropriate challenges. In the words of Carol Ann Tomlinson in the foreword to her book *How to Differentiate Instruction in a Mixed-Ability Classroom*,

“Acknowledging that students learn at different speeds and that they differ widely in their ability to think abstractly or understand complex ideas is like acknowledging that students at any given age aren’t the same height: It is not a statement of worth, but of reality. To accommodate this reality, teachers can create a “user-friendly” environment, one in which they flexibly adapt pacing, approaches to learning and channels for expressing learning in response to their students’ differing needs.

While the goal of each student is challenge and substantial growth, teachers must often define challenge and growth differently in response to students’ varying interests and readiness levels (Tomlinson, 2001).”

All learning happens on a continuum from novice to expert. Each stage of the continuum has different learning characteristics and learning needs. In *The Parallel Curriculum Model* this continuum is called Ascending Levels of Intellectual Demand (ALID) and the learner characteristics are described below.

Novice

- Experiences content at a concrete level
- Manipulates micro-concepts one at a time
- Needs skills instruction and guided practice
- Requires support, encouragement and guidance
- Seeks affirmation of competency in order to complete a task

Apprentice

- Understands the connections among micro-concepts within the discipline
- Connects information within a micro-concept
- Begins to interpret generalizations and themes that connect concepts
- Applies skills with limited supervision
- Seeks confirmation at the end of the task
- Reflects upon content and skills when prompted

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Practitioner

- Manipulates two or more micro-concepts simultaneously
- Creates generalization that explain connections among concepts
- Selects and utilizes skills in order to complete a task
- Seeks input from others as needed
- Exhibits task commitment and persistence when challenges are moderate
- Reflects upon both content and skills in order to improve understanding and performance

Expert

- Utilizes concepts with and among disciplines in order to derive theories and principles
- Creates innovations within a field
- Practices skill development independently and for the purpose of improvement
- Seeks input from other experts in a field for a specific purpose
- Works to achieve flow and derives pleasure from the experience (high challenge, advanced skill/ knowledge)
- Independent and self-directed
- Seeks experiences which cause a return to previous levels in varying degrees

This information guides curriculum design and instructional delivery by articulating the changes that characterize each learner at the stages between novice and expert. It provides a framework for thinking about how to challenge each learner with incremental sophistication--each learning experience just above easy reach of the learner who remains challenged and engaged. With a clear understanding of the characteristics and needs of each learner the teacher can select assessment tools, interpret assessment data with accuracy and use the data to create responsive curriculum and instruction. Teachers can use scaffolding techniques and instructional strategies appropriate to the needs of each student (Tomlinson, *The parallel curriculum: a design to develop learner potential and challenge advanced learners*).

For additional information: www.caroltomlinson.com/Presentations/NAGC_PCM21Cskills.pdf

Tomlinson, Carol Ann. *How to differentiate instruction in a mixed-ability classroom*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2001.

Tomlinson, Carol Ann. *The parallel curriculum: a design to develop learner potential and challenge advanced learners*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2009.